

Explaining Korea Religiosity to North Americans:

*Why Korean Spirituality Is Written the Way It Is**

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Over the twenty-seven years I have been teaching Korean history and civilization to students at the University of British Columbia on Canada's west coast, I have discovered that it is sometimes difficult for students who have been raised in North America to see through the conceptual boundaries North American culture erects to divide the world up into its different cultural elements so that it is easier to understand and navigate. In particular, I have found that many of my students find it hard to understand religiosity in Korea when it doesn't easily fit the labels used to discuss religion in Canada and the US. That is the case even with my many students of East Asian descent. Even though 38% of the students at UBC have Chinese surnames, and another 6% identify as either Korean or Korean-Canadian, many of those students are conservative Christians. (25% of Chinese in Vancouver are Christians, as are over 50% of Koreans) and have little, if any, knowledge of

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non-Christian religions. Moreover, they usually have acquired a somewhat narrow understanding of what a real religion is, and resist granting equal validity to non-Abrahamic religions, particularly those which don't share the Christian focus on theology and doctrine. That raises all sorts of problems when dealing with Confucianism, Buddhism, shamanism, and Korea's many new religions, even though it is impossible to discuss religiosity and spirituality in Korea without including Confucianism, Buddhism, and shamanism in that discussion.

It doesn't help my attempt to get my students to widen their understanding of religion that the only academic department at UBC with religion in its title is the Department of Classical, Near Eastern, and Religious Studies (CNERS, pronounced "sinners"), which, in addition to teaching Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and Arabic, also teaches Judaism, Christianity, and Islam but no other religious traditions. (The Department of Asian Studies sends faculty to that department to help it with their first-year survey of world religions.) Some of us in Asian Studies refer to CNERS jokingly as "the Department of Mediterranean Studies." However, it is not a joke when students in both my Korean religion class and in the broad survey of Asian civilization class I also teach insist that shamanism is nothing but superstition, that Buddhism and Confucianism are philosophies only and have no religious implications, and that new religions are fake religions. Their refusal to grant validity to non-Abrahamic religious traditions makes it difficult for them to see the significance of those religious traditions in Korea culture in particular and Asian culture in general.

Defining religion and spirituality

Therefore, I begin my class, and the textbook published as *Korean Spirituality*, by defining religion and spirituality in as inclusive a manner as possible. I want my students, and my readers, to focus on what the various religions of Korea have in common rather than how they differ so that they can, first of all, see that there is much more to religion in Korea than Christianity. Secondly, I want them to recognize that the broad definitions of religiosity and spirituality I provide nevertheless allow us to distinguish certain areas of Korean life and culture from other areas that don't address the same issues in the same way religions and spiritual practices do. In other words, I want them to recognize that there are beliefs, values, and practices in Korea that are worthy of the label "spiritual" and that applying such a label to them allows us to discuss them together while separating them from, say, political philosophies such as liberal democracy, Korean customs such as the heavy drinking that many men engage in, and the Korean culture they see on display in K-Pop and the songs of Psy (though I doubt any of them would see Psy as religious!).

In an effort to be as inclusive as possible, and to reach the many students who are uncomfortable with the notion of religion (which they associate with rigid moral codes and boring rituals) but have a more positive impression of spirituality, I provide definitions of both spirituality and religion. These definitions are not meant to be universally valid across continents and cultures but instead reflect the imposition of North American vocabulary onto the specific religious environment I see in Korea to make it easier for North Americans to understand it.

In *Korean Spirituality*, I define spirituality as “attitudes and actions grounded in the belief that there are invisible forces more powerful than we are, and that through interaction with those forces we can better themselves or make our lives more pleasant or meaningful.” To be clearer, I should have added modified “invisible forces” by adding “which are not amenable to experimental verification or mathematical analysis” in order to distinguish spirituality from science. Or I could have written “invisible forces that transcend the material realm.” The important thing to note here, though, is that I say “invisible forces,” not gods or spirits. That is gives spirituality a wider range than religion. As I define it in *Korean Spirituality*, religion is a form of spirituality but spirituality is much broader than religion alone.

I give religion and religiosity a more restricted reference than I give spirituality because my choice of language reflects the language of many people in the more progressive parts of North America, particularly in large cities and on the West Coast, who proudly announce “I am spiritual but I am not religious.” To them, and therefore for me in *Korean Spirituality*, religiosity refers to spirituality expressed within a specific institutional framework and motivated by a more clearly defined concept of the nature of those invisible forces. Those who call themselves “spiritual but not religious” usually mean that they are not members of any organized church and that they believe in some supernatural force or presence but do not feel the need for a detailed definition of who or what that supernatural force is. Spirituality that is not religiosity is more diffuse and more individual than religiosity. In other words, someone who is spiritual but not religious does not normally attend a church or

temple regularly and does not subscribe to a specific set of religious doctrines but feels he or she can believe in and interact with invisible forces in whatever way he or she personally feels most appropriate.

In the Korean context, both spirituality and religiosity entail interaction with invisible forces for the purposes of self-cultivation or the improvement of the conditions under which we live, but spirituality is broader than religiosity in that it can take place either within or outside a religious organization. Religiosity, on the other hand, implies joining together with like-minded individuals in a social organization defined by a common understanding of what sorts of invisible forces members should interact with (theology), how and when they should do so (detailed moral codes), and what roles various members should play in that interaction (an organizational framework). Increasingly in Korea, religiosity, both within and outside Christian circles, is linked to confessional congregations, to groups whose members identify as members of those groups based on shared beliefs, values, and practices.

According to the definition I use in *Korean Spirituality*, someone should not be labeled religious, or a believer in a specific religion, unless they gave priority to one particular approach to the supernatural over other approaches (recognizing only one approach as a valid approach) and agreed to let an organization that embodied that approach tell them what they could or could not believe, or what they could or could not do, if they wanted to maintain good relations with those spirits or spirit. Someone who refused to join a religious organization could still be called spiritual if they recognize the existence of

spiritual/immaterial forces, which may or may not be supernatural personalities, and believed that human beings should take the existence of those forces into account when attempting to overcome problems encountered in everyday life.

This distinction between spirituality and religiosity blurs when we try to apply it to the religious culture of pre-modern Korea. In pre-modern Korea, the only people we should label religious would be religious “professionals” such as Buddhist monks or shamans, since they explicitly identified themselves as members of a specific religious community. It was only over the last couple of centuries, particularly over the last half century, that large numbers of Koreans who are not religious professionals have come to believe that negotiations with spiritual beings, or the cultivation of a better moral character, are best done within a single clearly defined institutional structure. This rise in religiosity and religious identification reveals itself in the growing percentage of the Korean population claiming a particular religious affiliation, as show in the census figures and Gallup polls.

However, we shouldn't overlook the fact that, while religiosity, as I define it, is relatively new to most Koreans, Koreans have been a highly spiritual people for millennia. A defining characteristic of spirituality is a search for transcendence, in the sense of transcending the limitations of normal human existence and normal human capabilities. Visions of what needs to be transcended, however, differ. Many spiritual and religious traditions, including Christianity, emphasize transcending the limitations of the body and the material realm in which it is immersed. Koreans, before Christianity became an

important part of their religious landscape, have preferred to focus instead on transcending the limitations of individuality without giving as much thought to differences between the material (the body) and the immaterial (the soul).

In either case, transcendence is pursued as a solution to the problems inherent in the human condition. Those problems are the same the world over: illness, pain, suffering, and death, as well as poverty, are visible in every human community. Human beings, no matter where they live, may also encounter acts of nature such as hurricanes, earthquakes, or floods that threaten their health or their livelihood. Moreover, they may be frustrated by their inability to consistently act in the manner they know they should act.

I try to get my students to understand that spirituality and religiosity are defined not so much by belief in a Supreme God, by a divinely-ordained moral code, or by clearly-defined rituals as they are by the function they serve. It is the search for transcendence in general, not the specific tools selected to reach that goal, which defines spirituality. I tell them that spiritual beliefs and religious teachings offer various explanations of why human beings encounter the problems they encounter, and also offer various suggestions for how to overcome them. Spiritual and religious assumptions about the nature of ultimate reality, for example, provide a measure of peace of mind by giving us conceptual tools for understanding what would otherwise be an unintelligible world, and by offering us hope that, by utilizing certain techniques, we can influence what happens to us in that world. In other words, they provide us with hope for some measure of control over our lives, for some

way to transcend the problems of the mundane world. Without such hope, many people would live their lives in abject terror, never knowing what was going to happen next and feeling helpless in the face of whatever cards fate dealt them.

In other words, spirituality and religion rely on invisible forces (specifically, invisible forces which are not amenable to experimental verification or mathematical analysis) to provide explanations for what otherwise would be unexplainable, as well as predictions of what would otherwise be unpredictable and even prevention for what would otherwise be assumed to be unpreventable. Among the more important otherwise unexplainable events are, of course, death and what follows death as well as the existence of evil in this world, and in our lives. However, spirituality and religion can also offer us assurances that it can provide ways to deal with lesser problems such as disease, economic problems, or even winning admission to Seoul National University.

Some of my readers and students might argue that science and medicine, just like religion, promise explanations of what is otherwise unexplainable, predictions of what is otherwise unpredictable, and prevention of what is otherwise unpreventable. And they often rely on invisible forces, such as electricity and germs, to do so. I concede that it is often difficult to distinguish between spirituality and pre-modern science in Korea. For example, there were astronomers in pre-modern Korea, but they also functioned as astrologers. They drew implications for human behavior on the earth below from any anomalies they observed in the skies above. There were also geographers, but they were experts in feng shui (pungu,

geomancy]. They were supposed to identify the invisible rivers of energy that flowed through the ground and suggest ways to utilize that energy. Medical doctors existed in pre-modern Korea as well, but many medical books combined chants and prayers with acupuncture and herbal prescriptions as a way to improve the invisible flow of energy through the body.

A blurring of the boundaries between pre-modern science and religion in Korea occurs because both were concerned with interactions between human beings and invisible forces. However, we can make an analytical distinction between the two today because what we now label science focuses on that part of the universe, both visible and invisible, which is devoid of the quirks of personalities. Medicine and science rely on experimental findings that can be duplicated and on rigid mathematical analysis, which gives them a higher degree of predictability and effectiveness than religion can provide. I include some discussion of traditional Korean pungsu, medicine, and astrology in my undergraduate survey of the history of religion in Korea, but I also try to get my students to understand that simply focusing on invisible forces is not enough to qualify as a religion. Those invisible forces have to be beyond experimental manipulation or mathematical analysis to qualify as part of a religious concept of the universe.

I insist on using the term “invisible forces” rather than “gods and spirits” because that allows me to include within the category of Korean spirituality two philosophies that sometimes are called “religious,” even though they are non-theistic. We should call both Buddhist philosophy (unlike popular Buddhist religion) and Confucianism non-theistic rather than “atheistic”

because they both treat the question of whether or not God (or gods) exist as of such little import that they don't bother to spend much time arguing for or against God's existence. Since the term "atheism" implies the active rejection of the concept of God, Buddhist philosophers and Neo-Confucians are not atheists. Rather they are non-theists, people for whom the notion of God's existence is irrelevant or for whom the question of whether or not God exists never arises.

Since religious conviction implies belief in a supernatural being, Buddhist philosophy and Neo-Confucianism are not religious in the usual meaning of the term. However, they represent forms of spirituality, since they both assume that there are invisible forces much more powerful than any individual human being. In Buddhism one "invisible force" is karma. Karma is not a god. Its power cannot be confirmed through experiments nor can its impact be calculated with the tools of mathematics. In Neo-Confucianism, *li* is an important invisible force. I define *li* as the cosmic network of appropriate interactions that determines how human beings and everything else in the universe should behave. Both Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism assume that, by acting the way such invisible forces tell us to act, we can become better human beings (more truly human) and also create a much healthier, safer, and more predictable environment in which to live. For this reason, no discussion of Korean spirituality can ignore the important roles Buddhist philosophy and Neo-Confucianism have played in shaping Koreans beliefs, values, and practices over the centuries even though they do not fit the traditional Judeo-Christian definition of religion as centered on belief in God. Therefore we must include philosophical Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism as

part of Korean spirituality.

As I define it in *Korean Spirituality*, spirituality operates within a world view constructed from various ethical, cosmological, and ontological premises which assert that we can predict the otherwise unpredictable, explain the otherwise unexplainable, and control the otherwise uncontrollable by interacting with, aligning with, communing with, and even influencing the behavior of powerful invisible beings or forces. In the religious version of spirituality, such invisible forces are supernatural personalities who are introduced to humanity through myths and revelation and are approached through ritual and prayer. But it is possible to have spirituality without grounding it in a belief in supernatural personalities.

Once I have convinced my students that Buddhist and Confucian philosophies have to be included in any survey of Korean spirituality, even though they may not fit the usual definition of a religion, it doesn't take much effort to get them to see that the folk religion, both its animistic and its shamanistic components, should also be granted the respectability of the "spiritual" label. After all, the folk tradition is based on the assumption that appropriate interactions with invisible forces, in this case gods and spirits, will help us lessen the amount of uncertainty in our lives and make it possible for us to be healthier, happier, and more prosperous. However, the major problem students sometimes raise in regard to the folk religion is not its polytheism, though to many of them that means it is an inferior religion, but its lack of its own moral code. To most Westerners, the notion of a moral code not backed up by divine sanction is inconceivable (which causes

problem when they look at Buddhist and Confucian philosophy). The reverse is also true. A supernatural being who does not teach us how to behave properly is not a respectable supernatural being. If such a supernatural being does exist, rather than a god or God he is a devil or a troublesome goblin, unworthy of ritual interactions.

Redefining the relationship between religion and morality.

A survey of religions and spirituality worldwide reveals that many religions, such as Christianity and Islam, tend to place more emphasis on theology than on ethics. God is the fountainhead of ethical obligations in such religions, and the relationship between the individual and God is therefore more important than the relationship between any one human individual and another. This is often a defining characteristic of religion in the Western tradition. The traditional religions of Korea, on the other hand, tend to place more emphasis on ethics than on theology. Their primary concern is the good of the community rather than the personal benefit of an individual, and therefore moral codes that govern interaction within that community are given priority. (The one important exception in traditional Korea would be Buddhist monks, but they never made up more than a small percentage of the total population at any one time and, besides, though they pursue personal enlightenment, they don't tend to emphasize a relationship between an individual and a god.)

Despite these important differences between theocentric and

non-theocentric spiritual traditions, those emphasizing theology and those emphasizing ethics, spirituality in Korea can still be seen as essentially one manifestation of the universal human desire to transcend the limitations of individual human existence and overcome suffering. The spiritual pursuit of those goals, in Korea as well as elsewhere, is usually distinguished from non-spiritual ways of pursuing them by its reliance on the cooperation of supernatural forces to achieve those goals.

That raises the question of the relationship of supernatural forces to morality, the question of which has priority. I wrote a chapter on ethics and morality for *Korean Spirituality*, but my editor, a philosopher rather than a religious studies scholar, insisted that I take it out. The only topical chapters he would allow were on concepts of supernatural forces ("the spiritual gaze") and on ritual. Nevertheless, since morality is, in my opinion, the core of traditional Korean spirituality, I would like to share with you today my thoughts on traditional Korean approaches to ethics and morality that my editor excised.

The world's various religious and spiritual traditions do not always agree on the relationship between religion and morality. In much of the world, religions provide both the source and foundation for moral principles. God, or gods, proclaim the commandments, and men and women are obligated to obey those divine decrees. In other parts of the world, the gods traditionally played a supporting role. They could use their supernatural powers to enforce existing moral codes but they had no authority to contradict the fundamental ethical rules and regulations governing society.

Traditional Korea was one of those societies in which gods were restricted to supporting existing ethical principles and were not allowed to claim ethical authority over state or society. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam teach that God handed the Ten Commandments to Moses, and those commandments serve as the core of the moral principles human beings must follow. Korean tradition tells us that a nobleman in China's Shang dynasty, the viscount of Ji (known to us as Kija), moved to Korea a little over 3,000 years ago, when the Zhou replaced the Shang, and established a society ruled by 8 laws outlawing such offenses against society as murder, stealing, and brawling. According to that legend, those laws were not handed down by God. Instead, they were promulgated by a human being, the viscount of Ji, without any reference to any God or gods. That makes them quite different from the Ten Commandments God presented to Moses according to the Abrahamic tradition of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

In recent centuries, as all of you know, Confucianism provided the fundamental moral principles for Koreans. Though religions such as Buddhism could add additional moral obligations, the interpersonal (which I call anthropocentric) moral code of Confucianism served as the foundation. That is true even of the folk religion. The many spirits in the animistic and shamanic pantheon will be displeased if they notice that someone has behaved in an immoral manner. However, immorality is defined primarily by the Confucian principles defining appropriate interaction within the human community. For example, the spirits will be disappointed in sons or daughters who do not show proper respect for their mothers or fathers, or young people who do not display proper respect for

their elders. The spirits themselves don't generate such moral imperatives as filial piety and respect for seniors. They don't hand down commandments. Nor is enforcement of those moral principles their primary concern. They may withdraw their protection for a while from someone they perceive as immoral or even send an illness or a drought their way to warn them to behave themselves. But they don't threaten the immoral with eternal damnation, as God does in the Abrahamic tradition.

In the worldview that prevails in Korea's folk religion, there are no sins, if sins are understood as disobedience to the will of God. However, there are both taboos and expectations.

Such taboos and expectations do not constitute commandments. They are more like rules of etiquette applied to interactions between human beings and spiritual beings. Nor would it be a sin to violate those expectations, any more than it would be a sin to fail to say good morning to a neighbor you passed on the street on your way to work. Truly moral obligations came from outside the folk religion tradition. Human beings were supposed to respect one another and to always put the interests of their family and their community ahead of any individual personal gain. To act otherwise was to be immoral. Morality and immorality, however, were defined by social mores rather than by any divine proclamations. Ethical principles were independent of the will of any supernatural personality.

The same is true in Buddhism. Buddhism encourages compliance with its moral code with promises of a reward for thinking and acting appropriately as well as with threats of punishment for thinking and acting inappropriately. However, in the contemplative Buddhism favored by monks, philosophers,

and intellectuals, punishment is self-inflicted and rewards are seen as the natural fruit of one's own efforts rather than being an award presented by some supernatural judge. The Buddhist moral code, as interpreted by philosophical Buddhists, is not a list of "commandments," in the sense of "does and don'ts" handed down by a Lord on High. Instead, Buddhism provides precepts, guidelines for avoiding thoughts and actions that would reinforce the mistaken focus on the self that pulls human beings back after death to live, and suffer, again in this world of transitory and therefore frustrating phenomena.

Buddha does not punish those who violate those precepts. Rather, violators punish themselves by burrowing deeper into the soil of this world of selfish desires, immersing themselves in cravings that can never be completely and forever satisfied and therefore will always leave them dissatisfied. If, on the other hand, they follow the guidelines those precepts provide, they will leave behind their attachment to petty transient pleasures and escape the trap created by their own deluded pursuit of self-interest. Philosophical Buddhism interprets the precepts as showing the way to earn the reward of release from the cycle of birth-death-rebirth that prolongs human suffering.

That said, in popular devotional Buddhism we do find assertions that supernatural beings will reward good behavior or punish bad behavior. Popular Buddhism envisions the recently departed appearing before ten different judges over the course of the 49 days that follow their death and being either condemned to reincarnation in one of many hells or elevated to one of the pure lands that is heaven, depending on how they thought and behaved while they were alive. However, it is significant that

this Pure Land strain in Buddhism was not as strong institutionally in Korea as it was in China or Japan. Nevertheless, some temples in Korea have paintings on their walls depicting the torments that await those who violate the Buddhist precepts in order to encourage those who visit that temple to behave appropriately. Moreover, all large Buddhist temples complexes in Korea include a Judgment Hall (myeongbujeon) for the relatives and friends of the recently deceased to pray that those ten judges will be lenient with those that appear before them. But even in Pure Land Buddhism there is no God defining right and wrong. Instead, supernatural beings in popular Buddhism, just like the gods of the folk tradition, are supposed to enforce already an already existing moral code.

That already existing moral code consists primarily of universal and unchanging principles by which human beings were supposed to regulate their behavior. Those principles gained their stability from their perceived roots in human nature and in human society, two constants of human existence. They were not crafted arbitrarily by some God above. As a result, they focus on relations within the human community, especially the Five Relationships, rather than on obedience to God's dictates. That is why the Confucian moral code, unlike the Ten Commandments, doesn't begin with the a demand for recognition of the existence of one Supreme God and one God only, nor does it ask that one day a week be set aside to honor God. Confucian morality at its core is an **anthropocentric** morality, requiring each and everyone of us to remember at all times that we are members of communities consisting of our fellow human beings and our primary moral obligation is to act in such a way

that we take into account the reasonable needs and desires of other members of those groups.

Anthropocentric and anthropomorphic theocentric religion

I use the word “anthropocentric” quite often in *Korean Spirituality* because I want my students, and my readers, to recognize how different traditional Korean religion is from the Christianity that has come to occupy such a prominent position in the Korean religious landscape today. When Christianity entered Korea at the end of the 18th century, it introduced what was to Koreans then a radically different concept of ethics and morality. As already noted, Confucian ethics is anthropocentric, centered on interpersonal relations. Christian ethics is theocentric, prioritizing relations between individual human beings and God above. That means moral rules which in Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism served primarily as advice on how we should behave either in order to minimize suffering or to promote harmonious interaction across the universe became commands. Rather than offering suggestions for how we could overcome our individuality, as Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism did, Christianity ordered us to think and behave in specific ways as individuals. Christian scriptures told human beings what they should and should not do, and insisted each and every individual human being was obligated to obey those commands, or face divine punishment.

This is a radically different notion of morality. Not only does Christianity define morality as the will of God rather than

the natural consequence of human nature, it also requires individuals to place their relationship with God above their relationships with other human being. That is why I call Christianity theocentric. I want to highlight the fact that Christianity places God at the centre, while traditional Korean religiosity focuses on human society.

In the chapter on the spiritual gaze, I contrast the term anthropocentric not with theocentric but with anthropomorphic, again with the aim of highlighting for my students and readers that anthropomorphic religions like Christianity don't provide the only examples of genuine religion and spirituality, and that, moreover, Christianity has a lot more in common with some traditional religiosity than Christians usually want to admit. I label Christianity anthropomorphic because God is conceived of as possessing a personality and therefore is a being human beings can relate to.

The Christian concept of God is radically different from the way Koreans had viewed gods before they encountered Christianity. While the Christian God is the Supreme Being, his Christian believers believe they can talk to Him, and He responds. In other words, it was possible for Korean Christians have a personal relationship with the Supreme Being. That was a novel idea for Koreans. Before they encountered Christianity, the only gods Koreans normally encountered were the gods of the folk tradition, who might have been gods but were definitely not supreme beings. Korea's indigenous gods were only a little more powerful than humans and did not even come close to the dignity and majesty of the Christian God.

It has to be noted that there were anthropomorphic gods before Christianity entered Korea. Obviously, many of the gods of shamanism are anthropomorphic. It is their human characteristics that allow shamans to negotiate with them and even be possessed by them. And the Bodhisattvas before whom Buddhists pray also have many anthropomorphic characteristics. And, of course, Sakyamuni himself was once a human being, just as Jesus was. But the Christian focus on a personal relationship with the Supreme Lord above was new to Korea.

Moreover, it contrasted sharply with a strong anthropocentric spiritual gaze we find in philosophical Buddhism, in Neo-Confucianism, and in some of Korea's new religions. In philosophical Buddhism, we are supposed to focus our spiritual gaze inward, rather than outward toward a supernatural personality. A core principle of Buddhist philosophy is that the world of experience - - because it is transitory and everything in it is brought into existence by something else - - is ultimately unreal. However, underlying this unreal world of dependent transitory phenomena is Buddha-nature, undifferentiated all-encompassing thusness. There is nothing truly real outside of Buddha-nature, nor is there anything in Buddha-nature that can be distinguished from something else in Buddha-nature. If this denial of all differentiation as essentially unreal is applied to Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, then the worship of one Buddha or of many Buddhas and Bodhisattvas is worship of an illusion, since a Buddha is ultimately no different from anything else in the universe.

What, then, is a sincere Buddhist philosopher to do? The answer is study, meditate, chant, discipline your body, do whatever you have to do to see through the illusory veil that is

the world of everyday experience and awaken (become enlightened) to the undifferentiated thusness underlying phenomenal experience. However, Buddhist philosophers also recognize that not everyone, not even every Buddhist monk or nun, is capable of escaping from the normal way of looking at the world as divided into separate and distinct entities. Therefore, they encourage those not as advanced spiritually to at least focus their attention on Buddhas and Bodhisattvas as a way to develop attitudes of compassion and of trust in something greater than themselves. Such spiritual attitudes, Buddhist philosophers believe, will help them overcome the excessive focus on the self that is the root of all that is evil. Once they have transcended the narrow perspective that makes them think and act as though the universe revolves around them, they have taken the first steps toward developing - - if not in this life perhaps in the next - - an ability to also transcend any false hopes of gaining permanent satisfaction in this world. Once they have achieved that attitude of non-attachment, they will have earned release from the suffering caused by the search for permanence in an impermanent world and will no longer need the crutch of theism that helped them navigate the lower reaches of the path to salvation. This understanding of the theistic gaze as a tool to help a practitioner move beyond theism is quite different from the Christian approach in which the ultimate goal is theistic. Christians want to establish a personal relationship with God, not move beyond belief in his existence.

We see a similarly anthropocentric spiritual gaze in Neo-Confucianism. Rather than looking for a God Above, Neo-Confucians were supposed to look into their own heart-and

mind and find there the *li* that resonated with the *li* of the cosmos. Neo-Confucian spiritual practice focused on clearing away impediments, such as the selfish thoughts our physical nature generated, so that our true human nature, our virtuous mind-and-heart of *li*, could assume its rightful commanding role. Meditation to calm our emotions, ritual to calm the mind and body, and the study of Confucian writings were practices adopted by Neo-Confucians to direct their spiritual gaze toward the impersonal unifying network that governed the universe and should also govern our thoughts and actions. Since the goal was to fully realize what it means to be a true human being, this is an anthropocentric spiritual gaze rather than a gaze upon an anthropomorphic God Above.

Korean history shows clearly that, unlike Christians, Koreans have been able to choose between anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism in deciding where to direct the spiritual gaze that defined their spirituality. The Korean religious tradition has been much broader than the West traditionally has. That is the case still today, even among Korea's new religions. Religions such as Cheondogyo and Won Buddhism are clearly anthropocentric. No one would claim that the Ilwonsang that hangs in the front of Won Buddhist temples has any anthropomorphic characteristics. And no one in Cheongdogyo today ascribes any human personality traits to Hanullim. On the other hand, the Cheungsan family of religions worship a god-man named Gang Jeungsan, though they say that He descended to earth to speed the transition from the current theocentric world in which we live to a anthropocentric world in which gods are irrelevant!

Anthropocentric and Theocentric rituals

Some of my readers and students may balk at my attempt to grant equal spiritual validity to anthropomorphic and anthropocentric foci for spiritual endeavors. However, even those who insist that genuine religiosity must be focused on God Above can't help but recognize the difference between anthropocentric and theocentric religious rituals and practice.

Meditation, when it is focused inward as in the case of Buddhists and Confucians, is clearly an anthropocentric religious practice, since it is intended to purify the mind rather than to worship God. Anthropocentric religious practices typically are a form of self-cultivation, intended to help the practitioner uncover and activate what is defined as his or her true self. However, sometimes that true inner nature is defined as identical to the true nature of the cosmos, in which case the practitioner strives to become one with the universe, blurring the boundary between inner-directed and outer-directed spirituality. Nevertheless, whether it is Buddhists trying to try to shut down their mind, to empty it of all thoughts, or Confucians trying to focus on the underlying unity of the cosmos created by the cosmic network of appropriate interactions (*li*), or even Dahn World practitioners trying to unite with cosmic energy (*ki*), it is clear to everyone that such spiritual practices are very different from the quintessential theocentric religious practice of prayer.

Prayer is, by definition, theocentric. You don't pray to yourself. Instead you pray to a powerful being. Prayer can be either a request for assistance or a display of devotion. Either

way, prayer necessarily involves a relationship between the person praying and the being prayed to. The manner in which prayer is used to address and interact with a supernatural being varies greatly across the wide range of practices that comprise Korean spirituality. Prayer can be sedate and solemn or it can be emotional and loud. Prayer can be done primarily with words, or it can require material offerings. Koreans may pray with no expectation of an immediate response or they may expect their prayers to result in a personal encounter with the divine. The most fervent prayers are heard in Protestant churches and shaman rituals, though many Buddhists also pray.

Once my students recognize that prayer is not just a practice of monotheistic religions, and once they also recognize that some other spiritual practices and rituals are not oriented toward God or gods but instead are directly inward, they have taken two important steps toward admitting that the adjectives “spiritual” and “religious” can apply to a wide range of phenomena, not just to those within the Abrahamic religions. They learn to acknowledge that many of the practices central to Christianity and religiosity are found in other religious traditions as well, and they learn to acknowledge that there are some truly spiritual practices not directed at a God Above. Once that happens, I have achieved an important goal in writing this book: helping others go beyond the narrow Judeo-Christian theocentric concept of religion and spirituality in order that the full range of spirituality in Korea can be given the respect it deserves.

But what about North Korean spirituality?

A more difficult step is to get my students and readers to see the dominant political ideology of North Korea as a form of spirituality. Though students may resist it, there is a growing trend among scholars in North America to treat *Juche* as a religion, and not just because North Koreans seem to believe in *Juche* tenets with the same fervor that Christians exhibit toward their religious doctrines, and to display the same tendency to hold firm to beliefs that are not supported by empirical evidence or rigorous logic.

There are several other reasons for labeling *Juche* ideology a form of spirituality. First of all, it offers a solution to a problem all human beings face in their existence as separate and distinct individuals. It promises believers that, through membership in the *Juche* community, they can overcome death and gain immortality. According to *Juche* teachings, human beings exist only within societies. There is no human being who is totally alone, with absolutely no relationships and no interactions with any other human beings. Human beings exist as social beings rather than as isolated individuals. This means that human beings will continue to exist even after their individual physical lives end, as long as the society that defined their existence continues to exist. The Confucian roots of *Juche* thought are obvious. Confucians also defined human beings as social beings who exist only as members of a family and a society. However, Confucians argued that the only form of immortality available to individuals was being remembered by their descendants and disciples after their physical death. *Juche* offers a different way to overcome death. *Juche* promoters say that, because *Juche* philosophy will last until the end of time, all those who hold fast to *Juche* philosophy and unite around a

Juche-led organization under the guidance of a leader who embodies *Juche* will enjoy an eternal sociopolitical life even after their body has died. Since *Juche* defines human existence as communal existence, as long as the community of which we are a member continues to exist, so will we.

With its promise of immortality through membership in the *Juche* community, *Juche* philosophy meets a defining criterion of spirituality. It promises practitioners that they can overcome the limitations of existence as isolated individuals. *Juche* functions as a form of spirituality in a number of other ways as well. For example, it offers an object of a spiritual gaze. That object is none other than Kim Il Sung, the first and forever president of North Korea, who, North Koreans are reminded by inscriptions on towers all over their country, “will always be with us.” Just like a god, he has become immortal.

The regime in North Korea has also adopted the Christian practice of dating years from the birth year of the founder of their religion. The year 2013 is not 2013 in North Korea. Instead, it is *Juche 102*, marking 102 years since the birth of Kim Il Sung in 1912. Moreover, instead of celebrating Christmas on December 25, North Koreans celebrate the Sun’s Day on April 15, the day Kim Il sung was born. The period from 16 February (Kim Jong Il’s birthday) through 15 April is called the Loyalty Festival Period, the most festive period of the year in North Korea. Public celebrations are held throughout the country on the first and last days of this festival period, and in between, students are asked to demonstrate their loyalty by hiking in groups to sacred sites such as Kim Il Sung’s birthplace. North Koreans proudly label such treks pilgrimages to sacred sites.

Finally, *Juche* even has miracles. When Kim Il Sung died, birds were seen to weep, or so it was reported in the North Korean press. North Koreans are also told that on the night Kim Jong Il was born, three stars suddenly appeared in the sky above his purported birthplace. In subsequent years, his birthdays have been marked by such unnatural events as the appearance of double rainbows above that exact site, a log cabin on Korea's highest and most sacred mountain, Mount Paektu. That log cabin has joined Kim Il Sung's birthplace in Pyongyang as a holy site visited by pilgrims and newlyweds.

And *Juche* has its own rituals to not only remind North Koreans that they are part of the *Juche* community but to also help them remember where they must direct their spiritual gaze. On special occasions North Koreans visit the twenty-meter high bronze statue of Kim Il Sung in front of the Museum of the Revolution in Pyongyang, bow before it, and lay flowers at its base. When a North Korean couple marries, they both swear their loyalty to Kim Il Sung and then visit a nearby statue of Kim Il Sung (there are said to be over 35,000 such statues in North Korea) and place some flowers in front of it. They will then have their wedding picture taken with that statue in the background. In a final ritual display of belief in, and reverence for, the *Juche* philosophy, at a funeral mourners are supposed to cry out, "Though this body is deceased, the spirit of the revolution still lives."

Conclusion

I do not claim that the definitions I provide for the

technical terms I use in *Korean Spirituality*, or even the terms themselves, are applicable to every form of religion and spirituality everywhere. I defined religion and spirituality the way I did, and distinguished between theocentric and anthropocentric, and between anthropocentric and anthropomorphic, in order to highlight certain features of the religious culture of Korea so that non-Koreans can better understand and appreciate Korea.

I am obviously not a Korean. Yet I have spent over four decades studying the history and culture of Korea and have developed a special interest in religion and spirituality on the peninsula. What is it about Korea than has attracted so much of my scholarly attention? And why do I think it is so important that non-Koreans understand and appreciate its religious culture?

Aside from the fact that I came to Korea at a relatively young age and fell in love with the people, the food, and the culture, I have long been fascinated by the religious pluralism that I see south of the DMZ. It is well known in North America that, in terms of the percentage of its population that are Protestant Christians, Korea is the most Protestant nation in Asia. It is less well known that almost as many Koreans call themselves Buddhists as call themselves Christians (in the sense of both Protestant and Catholic), bringing the Christian and Buddhist populations in greater parity than is seen anywhere else in the world, even Singapore. Moreover, few outside of the small community of scholars of Korean religion are aware that Korea has the highest per-capita rate of Confucian shrines of any place on earth (unless the recent Confucianism boom in China has caused China to surpass Korea), and also has the

highest percentage of people performing Confucian-style ancestor memorial services on a regular basis. Most surprising is that there are at least 100,000 active shamans (some say it may be twice or three times that) in Korea, a remarkable statistic for one of the most technologically advanced societies on earth. On top of that, Korea is almost evenly divided between those who calls themselves religious and those who say they have no religious affiliation, a startling figure when the fervor of many of those Koreans who are religious is taken into consideration.

Korea provides a fascinating laboratory for studying religion, since there is such a great diversity of religions here. That includes not only the major religions of shamanism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity but also the many new home-grown religions. Those new religions are not only a reflection of Korea's religious breadth (there are new religions with Buddhist, Christian, Confucian, and shamanic roots), they also provide vivid examples of how some Koreans have tried to hold onto traditional beliefs, practices, and values while keeping up with the rapid pace of modernization. (I teach my students that new religions represent attempts to encase traditional beliefs, values, and practices in the protective shell of modern religious institutional structures.)

Along with this great religious diversity comes religious tolerance. There is some tension between religious groups, of course. The animosity some Protestants show toward Buddhism and shamanism is probably the most obvious example. But, for a country with such a wide range of religious beliefs, values, and practices, Korea has done an amazing job of keeping the peace. That may be because no one religious community is large enough to lord it over the others. Or it may be because, until

the anti-Catholic persecution starting in the late 18th century, Korea did not have the history of intra-religious violence we see in other countries. But, whatever the reason may be, Korea is a model of religious co-existence the rest of the world can learn from.

However, Korea can only serve as such a model when non-Koreans learn about the many different ways religiosity and spirituality manifest themselves in Korea, and learn to respect those many varieties of religion and spirituality seen on the peninsula by refraining from imposing Judeo-Christian Western categories on them. This, ultimately, is the reason I wrote *Korean Spirituality*. I wanted to introduce Korea's religious culture to non-Koreans not only so that they could share my fascination with Korea but also so that they could broaden their understanding of religion and spirituality in general and acquire the respect for religions other than their own that is essential if human beings of different religious orientations, and those of no particular religious orientation at all, are going to be able to peacefully co-exist and help usher in an era of world peace, something all of us, no matter what our religious beliefs and practices, desire.